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LECTURE TO SOUTH END CONFERENCE OF SOCIAL WORKERS
May, 1962 - Speech by David A. Crane

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South End and Urban Renewal As a Dynamic Process

Introduction:

Thank you for the opportunity of discussing approaches to problems of an area I love.

So much I would like to say,so little time to organize it in a meaningful way, my hope you will forgive the disjointedness and verbosity of my enthusiasm.

I first fell in love with the South End in 1955 as project director for Kevin Lynch's research project that resulted in his book "The Image of the City".

- what excited me then was the clear physical order of the South End as an urban district--the lines of through circulation and the lateral courts and squares for private living--the essence of the best theory of urbane environment (mobility and access to community participation and privacy and individuality);

- this order is further enriched by the architectural character of those parts of the area, like Union Park, that have the robust rhythm of the low-front brick houses played with a thousand variations--twos, fours, sixes alike, each group different, each dwelling still different;

  - the essence of "variety-in-order", springing from the tastes and efforts of the occupants rather than imposed.

- I remember the running argument that Kevin Lynch and I had as to whether the Back Bay or the South End presented a clearer and more appealing physical image.

  - I took the position that South End was the more honest in its physical expression of what went on inside the houses.

    - South End cruder in detail and material,but its dancing fantasies of bulbous shapes more joyful, more lived in. To use Walt Whitman's term, South End presented to me a visual image of "A Heap O' Livin'".

    - Back Bay, on the other hand, had fine architectural styling, seemed to express wealth and status, yet I knew that it was a transient way station.

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-Back Bay, on the other hand, had fine architectural styling, seemed to express wealth and status, yet I knew that it was a transient way station.

-Looking back on this argument, I realize now that while my sense of the artistic power of South End was correct, the invidious social comparisons were a bit overdrawn--

-In truth both areas are to an extent way stations for changing faces and activities.

-Both areas not only contain change of activity but are themselves undergoing an inexorable change of physical structures and appearance.

<u>South End and Back Bay, like every other part of Boston and big cities generally, are undergoing an inevitable process of change.</u>

-We can call the result of this change "blight" and attack it as a skin disease or as problem in patching cloth by cutting out the threadbare portions and replacing them with new cloth which we hope is better.

-This is what most urban renewal planners today would prescribe.

-But the new cloth, often in the form of high-rise housing beyond the means of incumbent residents, is too strong for the old cloth and quickly leads to further decay and patching.

-Once begun, the tailor, in this case the public renewal action agency, has to go on doing the whole job by himself and the problem soon is beyond his resources to cope with.

-The concept of "blight" in cities was invented by utopian reformists, and the challenge thrown against it was an act of war, not of love. In wars, everybody gets hurt.

-Furthermore, most of our planning concepts and development tools today are the inventions of idealists who painted pictures for themselves of a perfect physical state of being at a particular future time.

-The ten-year plan, the twenty-year plan.

-The neighborhood unit for all family living with a school at its middle--but children grow up, and some communities that may occupy the ground at a future date may not put all that much stock in child-raising as the be-all of their existence.

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-The zoning to keep things the way they are, to keep out of all the desirable places those sustaining industries that allow a community to continue its economic existence.

-An alternative approach to problems of change and urban renewal is to recognize the inevitability, indeed the naturalness of urban change, find out how it works, and then work with, rather than against, its natural causes to bring about, through a less-humanly hurtful process, a little better result than would occur without planned assistance.

-We really should be on friendlier terms with the forces that produce physical growth, maturation, obsolescense, decay, and renewal in a never-ending cyclical process of "new life through death".

-take the life of a row-house, for example, changing structure and community.

-We should have a more sympathetic and realistic view of the life cycles of human institutions: families, social communities, or economic organizations; and understand that the unique facilities and environment required by these organisms at different life stages must be met with the resources at hand;

-thus we can look at the conversion of former single-family houses to multi-family tenancy as the natural response of low-income families to the provision of shelter within their means--not as "crowding"--and simply make the conversion process a little easier for individuals to undertake in an intelligent fashion.

In a dynamic approach to urban renewal planning, I believe it is important to sort out some things that we physical planners often confuse.

-First, we must distinguish between physical facilities and the causes and cycles of their patterns of change over time, on one hand, and the human activity contents of facilities together with the causes and cycles of their patterns of change over time--

-the relation of activity contents and facilities is like the relation between musicians and theatres: A good performance results when the theatre is suited to the musician's particular brand of music;

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- if he is a basso profundo, we should have a large but non-resonant hall--if the musician is a violinist, we shall require a resonant chamber.

- in this analogy, "blight" is not an absolute measurement of unsatisfactory physical state, but rather a statement of relation between a facility and what is to go on inside it.

- thus, a community designed for large, middle-income families but actually occupied by small, low-income transient families may be blighted today and sound tomorrow merely by moving back to it the kind of occupants for which it is designed.

- Or the relative "blight" in this same community might be gotten rid of by remodelling its houses and community facilities to suit the realities of present occupants' needs.

- In other words, if we distinguish between <u>facilities</u> and <u>contents</u>, identify where each is in a cycle of change, then

  - the dimension of "blight" is a product of relating the differences in state of change between the physical environment and its occupancies

  - and the solution to the problem--<u>the urban renewal prescription</u> may lie in either of two directions, or a combination of both:

    - replacing the occupancies without any marked clearance or other physical action.

    - replacing or alteration of the facilities to better suit the occupancies.

  - in either case, we are intervening in a process that will result in a constant interaction of both and we may as well recognize that the discrepancies between content and facility will grow or recede as time goes on.

<u>Second</u>, a dynamic approach to renewal planning calls for distinctions to be made between <u>generative forces that cause change</u> and the <u>surface results</u> of these forces.

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<u>Second</u>, a dynamic approach to renewal planning calls for distinctions to be made between <u>generative forces that cause change</u> and the <u>surface results</u> of these forces.

-A deteriorated house in South End is not a fundamental cause of "blight" but a manifestation of external forces. These may be one or a combination of:

-natural physical age, wear and tear,

-wear and tear on community facilities,

-a change of population having less ability or interest in maintaining such a house--this change of population might, in turn, be the result of a change in transportation and job sources,

-a change in technology, life habits, or human preference causing that form of housing to be obsolescent in re: present-day human expectations.

-Just as deteriorated houses are not causes of change but manifestations of something bigger and more generative, the effective solution to the renewal problem lies,

-not in fixing up the surface

-but in tampering with perhaps reversing the effects of, the workings of the fundamental change-makers,

-thus, we might seek to stem the tide of "blight" in South End by such <u>strategic physical acts</u> as a major new transportation facility that would induce development of new and better-paid jobs, more versatile and satisfactory community facilities and services, or simply a greater public recognition of it as an area to care about--

-These major or "heroic-scale" physical changes, plus their induced community-wide effects, may in turn result in a thousand smaller physical acts by homeowners and residents on a natural market basis rather than resorting to public clearance and redevelopment of large tracts.

-alternatively, a search for <u>generative actions might lead us to non-physical strategies</u>, such as a program to educate present occupants for assimilation into higher-paid industries, thus assisting them in gaining the means for self-help renewal--or programs of assistance to residents in relocating outside the South End to areas more suited to them.

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-In both these cases, the selective utilization of major and consequential actions, whether physical or social in nature, promises a far more economical and painless renewal process, with better human satisfactions, than the familiar bulldozer techniques of physical urban renewal.

Third, a dynamic approach to urban renewal planning calls for a distinction between the making of a plan for a static future condition and the experimental process of acting and reacting within a pre-ordained strategy leading to alternatives.

-For one thing, we can only see the future dimly. The growth and change of a city is a struggle for life and existence among many occupancies of physical facilities. We cannot accurately predict the outcome.

-For another thing, even if we could predict, no planner should ever be entrusted with making specific goals for the community of the future in the complete pre-fabricated sense.

-A third reason for eschewing plan-making and espousing experimentalism is that, even forgetting the future, we are not even sure of the immediate effects of certain renewal techniques. We need to try them on for size and then take whatever next steps are indicated.

-The best we can do is:

-to rejoice in the natural struggle for existence of different activities or populations, while making sure it is a fair fight.

-offer good initial demonstrations of facility types that are possible, or of new social services exemplifying different types of human wants.

-and then watch community response for a clue to the next actions.

-South End is too big, too frought with problems and uncertainties, too rich in its potentials for us to try to preconceive its detailed form or its activity composition.

With this as a statement of the kind of philosophy I would bring to tackle urban renewal in South End, let me show you a few maps and slides of some sketch plans we did last fall.

-These will illustrate some of the techniques of physical change and renewal I would consider in South End in re: The whole of downtown Boston (or the Regional Core):

-Identify the area's physical order, assets, and condition maps--how is physical order related to social? (Charlie Fraggos asked me for a prognostication--what goals? What goals do I not wish to determine?)

-The search for heroic, causative acts of physical change.

Having determined the desirable major physical actions, then how would we proceed?

-Well, in physical terms, we might simultaneously:

-offer some new middle-income housing or rehabilitation,

-carry on demonstration low-income rehab, self-help or on contract basis,

-produce several experimental forms of new low-income housing,

-carry on experimental open-space development, self-help and otherwise,

-tackle the problem of the small merchant's rehab and mixed land use buildings.

-In social terms, I feel that is the subject of your conference and not for me to prescribe the answers.

-But I am sure that your answers, to be effective, must be given in a positively dynamic spirit, not in any vain hope of preserving or returning to a status quo.

In closing I would like to quote the Indian poet, Rabindranath Tagore:

"Death can continue to dwell in the same sepulchre, but life must increasingly outgrow its dwelling place; otherwise the form gets the upper hand and becomes a prison....Life is a creative idea; it can only find itself in changing forms".

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